

# Entangled: Threads and Making

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## **Entangled: Threads and Making**

Turner Contemporary, 28 January to 7 May 2017

Curator: Karen Wright with Turner Contemporary

Exhibition catalogue: Karen Wright, ed., *Entangled: Threads and Making*, (Margate: Turner Contemporary, 2017)

Reviewed by Imogen Racz, Senior Lecturer In Art History, Coventry University.

Although the title *Entangled: Threads and Making* suggests an exhibition of textiles, in fact it covers a much greater range of materials. It includes the work of over forty female artists, with the emphasis being on making by hand; manipulating materials that would have not traditionally have been considered 'high' art.

In recent years there have been a number of exhibitions devoted to women artists, including *Whack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007). Unlike *Entangled: Threads and Making*, this incorporated the full panoply of artistic means. *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016*, (Hauser and Wirth 2016), like *Entangled: Threads and Making*, was focused on making and materials, but the roots were sculptural so the materials broader. *Entangled* focuses on 'women's' materials related to textiles and the domestic. In both the exhibition and catalogue the engagement with textiles, natural materials like quills and grass stems, and everyday debris like polythene and odd bits of wood, glue, paper and string that are normally found in the home, proposes the notion of a 'female' aesthetic. While the debate about the gendering and material limits of textiles has been ongoing in Britain since the early 1980s – no longer need they be tasteful, flexible and soft – some exhibited works, like Eva Hesse's 'Untitled' (1969) of vessel shapes in paper, masking tape, cheesecloth and glue fall

outside textile debates and its genre roots. However, the exhibition proposal is strong, with a coherent aesthetic and intellectual continuum.

The exhibited artists have fought the clichés of ‘textile’, ‘amateur’, ‘craft’ and ‘female’ as not being art. Eva Hesse, who worked against a backdrop of masculine minimalism, wrote that ‘excellence has no sex’. Louise Bourgeois, who knew Duchamp and adopted many surrealist strategies, denied wanting to make ‘women’s art’. However, the use of techniques and materials traditionally associated with female, domestic creativity and hobby craft, kept many female artists on the margins of the canonical mainstream resulting, as Francis Morris said in her published interview, in their work remaining, until recently, ‘invisible’. (pp. 2122) In Ann Coxon’s excellent essay “Making something from Nothing’ (pp. 30-43), she considers this, using Lucy Lippard’s famous essay of the same name as a foil. Coxon outlined how many artists, including Anni Albers, had been pushed towards certain materials, but had challenged their categorization and re-presented them as important vehicles of expression.

Karen Wright has curated the exhibition with care, balancing the formal elements of weight, colour, scale and texture in adjacent objects, across the rooms and at different heights, so that there are happy echoes and resonances. In one gallery, for instance, the browns of Mona Hatoum’s ‘4 Rugs (Made in Egypt)’ (1998/2015) on the floor are echoed in the natural colours of Susan Hiller’s ‘Salt’ (1972) and Ann Cathrin November Høibo’s ‘Untitled Diptych’ (2016). The abstract diptych introduces patches of blue, the scale of which are then picked up by Kiki Smith’s ‘Sky’ (2012) and followed through to Sheila Hick’s ‘La Sentinella’ (2014). The close-weave smoothness of Hiller’s work contrasts with the

more open and weighty hand-woven diptych, the overall thickness of Smith's Jacquard tapestry, and the hanging, wrapped threads of 'La Sentinella'. (Fig ?)

There is also a sense of a journey. The corridor gallery has framed works hung on the wall that repay close viewing, such as those by Geta Brătescu. (Fig ?) This opens out into the large and light gallery to the right, where Eva Hesse's 'Untitled' (1969) and the delicate structures of grass heads by Christiane Löhr are arranged on horizontal platforms, with the translucent swathes of dusky pink polythene of Karla Black's 'What to Ask of Others' (2011) hung high on the wall. (Fig ?) Requiring viewers to engage with their bodily responses to scale, space and material is at the heart of sculptural sensibility and good exhibition design.

The exhibited textiles demonstrate many of the preoccupations of the past century: whether to align with the political, celebratory, social or political nuances of image, or to consider the sculptural and emotive possibilities of the construction – or destruction – of material. The techniques visible are multiple, from binding, wrapping and weaving to cutting, fraying and unraveling. These are not necessarily neat but, as with the frayed edges of red, course cloth sutured together in Bourgeois' 'Hand' (2001), the visible processes speak of the hand and mind of the makers. (Fig ?) Many play with our collective tacit knowledge shared through clothing, as with the knitted 'hats' of 'Natural Fibres' (2016) by Paola Anziche, which viewers pulled over their heads, or Caroline Achaintre's 'Bernadette' (2016) of handtufted wool that suggests the form of a jumper.

The catalogue includes a series of essays and interviews with key women in the art world. It is a rich exploration of female making and philosophy, of textile history, and the

different ways that so many fought to work around the inflexible art system. The interview with Frances Morris introduced some of the themes discussed in later texts, including marginalization, mid-century struggles by powerful artists and the notion of a female artistic sensibility. Although some of the feminist ground covered in the essays has been well rehearsed elsewhere, they assert the importance of female creativity in the shadow of what Karen Wright and Siri Hustvedt clearly see as a time of reawakened misogyny. The photographic studio portraits also assert artistic status, continuing and subverting the historic paradigm of the male sculptor in his studio. My only reservations are that there is no complete list or images of exhibited works.

This is a stimulating exhibition that has stayed with me since I saw it a few weeks ago. Although diverse, Wright constructed a coherent intellectual and aesthetic thread that ran through the display. The ideas, formal variations and the sensitive way that the works have been exhibited make it a rich visual and intellectual feast.

